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ABSTRACT

This article examines the contribution of television and other mass media to alcohol consumption and its abuse. The author notes that there is no scientific evidence available that addresses this point directly, and the importance of such an issue is not recognized in the scientific literature. The absence of this information interferes with the ability to act wisely in regard to portrayals of alcohol in entertainment and advertising on television. The author delineates four issues that are of central importance in examining the portrayals of alcohol consumption on television. (1) the pattern and character of such portrayals; (2) the contribution of such portrayals to the concepts held by young people about alcohol; (3) the contribution of portrayals to maintaining or altering patterns of alcohol consumption among adults; and (4) the potential role of television in altering patterns of alcohol consumption and abuse. (Author/YRJ)

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TELEVISION AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND ABUSE

George Comstock

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Television and Alcohol Consumption and Abuse*

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The Rand Corporation

The contribution of television and other mass media to alcohol consumption and abuse is unknown. There is no body of scientific evidence that bears directly on this question. At best, social science can raise some of the pertinent issues on the basis of research concerned with other than alcohol consumption and abuse.

Let me document the lack of evidence,

(1) A recently published analysis of the 450 items judged to be most important in the scientific literature on television and human behavior includes none that deal with alcohol consumption or abuse (Comstock, 1975).

(2) A guide to the entire scientific literature on the topic that covers more than 2,300 items similarly includes none that deal with alcohol consumption or abuse (Comstock and Fisher, 1975).

(3) In addition, an account of research underway in mid-1975, covering about 50 projects in-progress, uncovered no projects focusing on alcohol consumption or abuse (Comstock and Lindsey, 1975).

There are four issues where this absence of information interferes with our ability to act wisely in regard to portrayals of alcohol in entertainment and advertising on television:

- The pattern and character of such portrayals.

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*Statement prepared at the request of Senator William B. Hathaway, Chairman, Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics, Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, in connection with hearings March 8 and 11, 1976, on the impact of mass media on the potential abuse of alcohol.

- o The contribution of such portrayals to the concepts held by young people about alcohol, including the role, if any, of such portrayals in the eventual decision of whether or not to consume alcohol.
- o The contribution of such portrayals to maintaining or altering patterns of alcohol consumption among adults.
- o The potential role of television in altering patterns of alcohol consumption and abuse, including the use of warnings and disclaimers in connection with alcohol advertising, the presentation of educational programs on alcoholism, and the use of the medium to deter abuse by anti-alcohol public health commercials.

For convenience, we can call these the problems of the message, the young audience, the adult audience, and the potential for constructive intervention. We should look at each separately.

The Message

We know very little about the way alcohol is portrayed on television, either in entertainment or commercials. What we do know amounts to this:

- o Portrayals and references to alcohol in television entertainment are quite frequent, with 80 percent of all primetime programs containing one or more portrayals or references during two months in early 1975 (Dillon, 1975a,b,c).
- o Television advertising is confined to beer and wine, and the circumstances of presentation are circumscribed by the industry codes, which prohibit commercials which portray or encourage use by persons under-age, use in connection with hazardous activities, or use as leading to personal achievements.
- o Industry codes call for de-emphasis on alcohol in program content, and portrayals consistent with plot and character.

Beyond this, we know nothing. Within that high frequency of portrayal, we do not know whether alcohol is typically a solution, irrelevant, or a

part of the problem within a drama or comedy; whether alcohol use typically leads to admiration, indifference, pity, contempt, or fear on the part of others; whether it typically occurs in ordinary, everyday contexts, or in circumstances extraordinary for the viewer; and whether it is typically the social norm or an exception. We know that alcohol advertising is constrained, but we do not know anything about the appeals or the scheduling of the commercials that are actually broadcast. We know that deemphasis is urged, but we do not know how that admonition is translated into actual entertainment.

Furthermore, because of this ignorance, we have no way to measure the impact of remedial action when it is taken, including the impact of hearings such as these. We are forced to begin with personal impressions, a fragile and unreliable source however important to each of us individually, and we are forced to end in the same way.

The Young Audience

We must not forget the dictum of communication research that effect cannot be inferred from content alone. On the basis of common sense, moral commitment, judgment, or intuition, an individual may decide to act on the basis of content. We need to know more about content in this area so that such motives can operate on as sound a basis as possible. However, we must not mistake such action for being grounded in solid evidence about the influence of the kind of content in question.

The issue of television and alcohol consumption and abuse raises all of the many unresolved questions about the role of the mass media in the socialization of the young. The accumulation of evidence suggests that television can affect the behavior and attitudes of young persons, and such a view is more compatible with what is known than a "no effects" proposition, but it is not possible to say anything with any certainty about television and alcohol.

A comparison with the situation in regard to television violence and the aggressiveness of young persons is instructive. Although the most justifiable interpretation of the evidence is that the viewing of television violence can increase the subsequent aggressiveness of young

viewers, there is much that is not known, much that is speculative, and much that is open to debate, including the degree to which such television-induced aggressiveness is a serious social problem. Yet, the relevant scientific literature numbers in the hundreds. In regard to alcohol, there is no similar literature.

Let us consider some of the difficulties we confront:

(1) The two key points are the decision to consume alcohol and the transition from socially acceptable to unacceptable drinking habits. In both instances, the chain from initial exposure of the young person to mass media messages about alcohol is long and intertwined with numerous other influences occurring before and after that initial exposure, including additional mass media exposure.

(2) Alcohol consumption and abuse is not ethically acceptable as a manipulated or induced outcome for young persons in scientific study. The study of the many factors which influence aggressiveness has always been impeded by the ethical bar to inducing truly harmful aggressiveness, yet there are many ways to simulate true aggressiveness, such as the widely known one of administering electric shocks that are in fact not shocks at all. In the case of alcohol consumption or abuse, there are no ready simulations.

Nevertheless, despite these problems, television's influence in regard to the young is justifiably of concern and merits scientific investigation. The television industry obviously does not permit portrayals or advertising of alcohol in programming specifically aimed at young audiences. However, the absolute number of young persons watching television intended for a general audience is large, although they are a minority of the total audience. Furthermore, the market for certain alcoholic products promoted by television, such as "pop" wines, is supposedly a youth market, and one might well ask whether the development of such markets involves shifts from other alcohol consumption, the attraction of new users, or an increase in the consumption of old users, as well as whether exposure to such ads prior to reaching the legal

drinking age affects alcohol decisions after that age. We are not justified at reaching any conclusions about television and alcohol in regard to the young on the basis of what we know, but what we know does suggest that this is a topic on which we should find out a great deal more.

The Adult Audience

The adult audience does not pose fewer problems of inference. For one thing, the literature on adults is relatively sparse compared to that on children. For another, the history of science in this area suggests that we may inadvertently ask the wrong question.

We have always tended to look for a large effect attributable to the mass media. Although there are singular instances where this occurs, including political triumphs and merchandising coups, the typical situation is one in which the direct influence of the media appears to be slight. Often, this is interpreted as the media reinforcing or maintaining a present pattern of behavior. In the present case, such reinforcement or maintenance could be an important factor. We are usually ready to believe that young persons learn from television as well as from such conventional sources as the home and the school. We should not forget that the same thing may hold for adults, particularly in areas where their own beliefs may be uncertain or in conflict. We have no justification for indicting television, but we have good reason to want to know more.

Potential for Constructive Intervention

We know almost nothing about television's potential for constructive intervention in regard to alcohol consumption and abuse. Since we do not know whether the present quantity and kind of portrayals and advertising contribute to consumption and abuse, we do not know what the effects would be of a marked change in such portrayals. We do not know whether educational programs would actually reach those who are present or potential abusers of alcohol, or primarily those concerned in some way about such persons. Furthermore, we do not know whether anti-alcohol

public service commercials, warnings or disclaimers in conjunction with alcohol commercials, or other specialized messages would serve their intended purpose or simply heighten curiosity and interest in alcohol, especially among the young. Even if we apply a remedy at hand, we do not know whether it will contribute to a cure.

Consumption vs. Abuse

Although the extremes of abuse are identifiable, the line between consumption and abuse is difficult to define. We only have no trouble if we accept some formal definition in terms of quantity of consumption within a specific time period. Nevertheless, we must arm ourselves with a firm definition if we are to be able to determine whether television or other mass media contribute to either. Then, we may ask the two separate questions:

- Does television contribute to alcohol consumption short of abuse?
- Does television contribute to alcohol abuse?

Some may believe that alcohol consumption and abuse are synonymous and that abuse only varies sharply in degree. Others will be concerned only should the answer to the second question be yes. What must be emphasized is that these are two separate questions.

Media Culpability

It is very easy in discussing the possible contribution of television and other mass media to alcohol consumption and abuse to give the impression that the media clearly bear some responsibility. This is the inevitable result of focusing on the possible contribution of a single factor, and there is no intention to convey such an impression.

The young person grows up into an alcohol-oriented society. The adult participates in one. Television and other mass media may or may not seriously influence behavior in regard to alcohol, but they cannot be examined in isolation. Furthermore, we must not focus solely on a single medium. Each must be examined separately because each has its particular

audience and character, but this same fact also makes it necessary to examine the entire set in conjunction with each other. For example, television's heavy use by young persons justifies our giving it attention, but we should not forget that by the time young persons are making their initial decisions in regard to alcohol they are also increasingly becoming users of other media, such as newspapers and magazines, which often carry extensive hard liquor advertising and pictorial displays featuring alcohol in conjunction with sex, adventure, and accomplishment.

The issue of media culpability, in the sense of meriting condemnation or blame, hinges on two factors. The first is relative contribution compared to other influences. The second is remediability, or the capacity to alter the media to delimit such contribution. If we find the contribution of the family large and that of the media small, but the family virtually unreachable and the media easy to repair without harm to civil liberties, artistic expression, or something else that we value, we will find the media worthy of blame--and we should look toward its repair. But if we conclude, after we have held the media to the highest possible standards and all involved have taken all the steps compatible with the important values which must be protected in regard to the media, that we cannot do much to effectively alter the impact of the media, we must also be realistic and absolve the media from blame.

The Role for Research

Very little can be said with certainty. We are rich in opinions and poor in facts. We should not expect the struggle for practical solutions, such as the development of different industry codes, to wait upon new research. We should expect that struggle to nurture new research and to redirect itself in accord with the evidence that research provides.

There are several issues which the social sciences and the various concerned public agencies which support them should confront:

(1) The description of the pattern and character of portrayals of alcohol on television in entertainment and in commercials, with particular attention to differences between classes of broadcasting, such

as networks vs. independent stations; to such portrayals when the young audience is large; and, to the tracking of shifts in such portrayals as public pressures, Congressional interest, and other factors change, as may be happening at the present time.

(2) The analysis of the role of the media in the initial alcohol decisionmaking of young persons, including shifts toward patterns of abuse, with particular attention to such factors as long-term, cumulative media exposure and more recent prior media exposure.

(3) The analysis of the contribution of the media to maintaining or shifting the consumption and abuse patterns of adults.

(4) The evaluation of all attempts at educative, prescriptive, or admonitory interventions by the media, with particular attention to the possibility of unintended encouragement or enticement of young persons.

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